

Pericles and After

Nick Fisher

In his novel *The Plague*, published in 1947, Albert Camus depicted a fictional outbreak of bubonic plague on an Algerian town in the 1940's; Camus' cool and severely factual 'chronicle' uses the plague as a symbol of the German occupation of France in the Second World War, and indeed of the horrors of war in general.

In the years 430-428 B.C. Athens was attacked by an actual plague. It had colossal consequences. So, at least, argued its historian Thucydides. First, because it carried away nearly 5000 of her foot soldiers and cavalry and an uncounted number of the rest of her citizens, and thus did more than anything else to weaken her strength for war (3.87); second, because it was responsible for the spread of all types of 'lawlessness' in Athens (3.53). The account of 'moral decline' here may well be somewhat exaggerated; it is also clear that Thucydides, like Camus, is using the plague as a symbol in miniature of the War. The parallels between the effects of the plague and the effects of civil war (*stasis*), described at greater length in the Third Book (3.82-3), are very striking.

The most famous victim of the plague, the Athenian politician Pericles, has his death noted, and his obituary written, by Thucydides in one of the most important, and most debated, chapters of the whole work (2.65); the chapter also describes a 'moral decline', this time in the conduct of politics. Pericles died in late summer 429. Curiously, however, Thucydides does not tell us that Pericles died of a general weakness that followed a relatively light attack of the disease; that information comes to us from a biography of Pericles written by Plutarch over 600 years later. Perhaps Thucydides merely forgot to state this explicitly. Certainly, the structure of the first half of Book 2 is built on an ironic contrast between the picture of Pericles in charge of Athens in the first year of the war, giving an idealistic, harmonious, portrait of Athens in his famous 'Funeral Speech' at the end of that year, and the much gloomier picture of Athens suffering under the plague, and turning against Pericles' policies, convicting and fining him. Then, when the people immediately re-instated him in office, he promptly died. It is easy to see how these ironies gain in point if we recall that the plague killed him.

Pericles' balancing act

Pericles had for thirty years maintained a position of dominance in the Athenian democratic system that was quite exceptional; after his death the character of Athenian politics changed in a number of important ways. Before we come to Thucydides' analysis of these changes, it will help to highlight some aspects of the successful balancing act on top of the

greasy pole that Pericles performed for so long: this can best be done in the form of a set of contrasts and paradoxes.

- 1) Pericles was an aristocrat by birth, yet throughout his career he worked for the establishment and preservation of the 'radical democracy'. Despite this, he was still not regarded as a 'class-traitor', or a man 'unacceptable to the better classes'.
- 2) Pericles was a great orator and by far the most popular politician of his generation, yet he gave an impression of lofty, 'Olympian' detachment and austerity. We find this picture in Thucydides' comments on his capacity to control the assembly and maintain its support for his policies, against its feelings; we see it also in the more critical glimpses of his rhetoric and his 'Olympianism' in various passages of the contemporary comic poets.
- 3) Pericles was something of an 'intellectual', and had close connections with the prominent philosopher Anaxagoras, and a notorious thinker like Protagoras; in addition he planned the great building programme on the Acropolis with the sculptor Pheidias. Yet such men were regarded with considerable suspicion by many people for the radicalism of their religious, scientific and moral ideas. Hence Pericles was to some extent vulnerable when Pheidias was attacked in the courts for embezzling gold from the statue of Athena, and Anaxagoras for impiety. Yet Pericles seems also to have maintained good relations with prominent representatives of traditional religious practices like the seer Lampon, and avoided being too tarnished by association with the supposedly subversive intellectuals.
- 4) The last in the series of political and social reforms brought about by Ephialtes and Pericles between 462 and 450 was the citizenship law of 451/0, proposed by Pericles himself. This sought to protect the interests of citizen women by increasing their chances of marrying Athenian citizens and bearing Athenian sons; it did this by deterring Athenian citizens from marrying the daughters of foreigners, whether those living abroad, or the increasing numbers living in Attica. Pericles had already, before 451/0, divorced his wife, by whom he had had two sons, and some time after the law was passed he formed a lasting association with Aspasia of Miletus, and had a son by her, also called Pericles. The conflict between the intentions of the law and the conduct of its proposer became a stark contradiction when, after Pericles' two sons by his former wife had died in the plague, he was granted a special grant of citizenship for his son by Aspasia. Nothing shows more clearly the affection, gratitude, and, at the end, pity, felt by the Athenians for Pericles than this special favour given to him, despite the fact that for more than a decade his association with this foreign woman had incurred him ridicule from political enemies and comic poets alike.

Jockeying for position

After Pericles' death, radical changes in politics took place. The tensions of political conflict in Athens increased considerably; some of the reasons are perceptively analysed in Thucydides' obituary notice. After describing the ways Pericles controlled the assembly, and won widespread respect, Thucydides gives us this famous judgement: 'So, it was in theory a democracy, but in reality it was a rule by the first citizen.' This verdict can only be understood if we read also the sentence that follows: 'But those who came after him, because they were rather more equal with each other and because they were striving, each of them, to become the first man, they changed policies so as to surrender control of affairs to the people to fit in with its pleasures'.

The first sentence has produced endless discussions; yet one essential point can be established with certainty. Thucydides cannot be saying that Athens ceased, constitutionally, to function as a democracy, that Pericles had acquired any extra powers, or that the people had lost any of its powers, because he has just demonstrated the opposite, in his account of how Pericles had been fined and thrown out of office, and his policies temporarily rejected. Thucydides is saying here that, thanks to his powers of persuasion and judgement, Pericles was extraordinarily successful, over a very long period, in having his views accepted and consistent policies implemented. Contemporary comic poets who presented Pericles as a Zeus, or as a tyrant, were making the same point with comic force.

The sentence that follows confirms this interpretation. The argument is that, whereas Pericles had been able to pursue consistent policies, none of his successors managed to command sufficient support for long enough to do this. This shows that Thucydides is not suggesting that the 'rule' exercised by Pericles was at all 'undemocratic', in the sense that the proper laws and procedures of the democracy were set aside; talk of a Periclean 'monarchy' is inappropriate. Elsewhere Thucydides makes it clear that he regarded the Periclean period as no less democratic than those that immediately preceded and succeeded it.

But there is more to these two sentences. Such a dominance as Pericles achieved was highly unusual, and not easily repeated. This is primarily because the organization of the democracy was specifically designed to ensure that no one man could reach such a dominant position. The major decision-making bodies were very large (Assembly, Council, Courts); the Chairmanship of the Assembly and the Council changed every day and could not be held twice; all offices were boards of equals – most importantly of all the board of ten generals, no one of whom had any greater powers than the rest; there were no political parties, with leaders, mass membership or common programmes.

There were, it is true, loose groupings of politicians, temporary alliances or drinking clubs of friends, who cooperated with each other in politics, and who are often referred to in our sources in phrases such as 'those around Theramenes' or 'the friends of Pericles' which indicate that these groups were often dominated by one top politician, organizing a number of adherents. But such groups would normally be constantly competing, splitting and re-forming; no mechanism in the system makes it at all likely that any one individual, with or without his 'faction', would be able consistently to persuade the people to follow his policies. There is nothing in the system remotely resembling a Prime Minister or a President.

Thucydides, no doubt assuming that his readers are aware of this, makes a further, vitally important, point about the situation after Pericles' death. Not only did the system return to 'normal', as a number of prominent politicians found themselves competing for influence and power within the system; what made this situation worse was that each one who got close to the top dreamed of occupying a Pericles-type position. This turned out to be harder than they realised, and made them the more ready to adjust their ideas to what they thought the people wanted, to try ever more energetic policies for winning the war or expanding the empire, and to knock out their enemies by ruthless assaults in the courts. All this, he suggests, greatly intensified the hostilities, the hatreds and the extremism of political life.

Pericles' 'heir'

One may disagree with some of Thucydides' analysis, and his criticism of various politicians such as Cleon, but he has hit here on an important element in the increasingly volatile and intense atmosphere of Athenian politics after Pericles. The sentences which follow mention 'mistakes' which the democracy made in the war, and concentrate on the Sicilian disaster; these sentences clearly bring into the argument the figure of Alcibiades, the politician whose charismatic advocacy of the expedition seems to have been crucial to the decision to mount it. Alcibiades displayed a passionate desire, while still relatively young, to be the top man; he was quite unable to give up acts of violence and mockery (seen most spectacularly in the profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries indulged in at drinking-parties by him and his friends), all of which showed his undemocratic contempt for the values of ordinary Athenians. All that, combined with the strong desire of his enemies to bring him down, contributed much to the expedition's failure, weakening its impetus by removing its most dynamic leader. Alcibiades, Pericles' nephew, more than any other, must have felt he was destined to be the true heir to Pericles' position; there are many other factors involved, but there is a sense in which the long saga of the Athenians' love-hate relationship with Alcibiades was the more fraught and ultimately the more disastrous precisely because his uncle had led Athens for so long and with such success at the time of its greatest prosperity and prestige.

Nick Fisher is Lecturer in Classics at University College, Cardiff. He has written on symposia, clubs and associations in the ancient world, and is currently completing a book on Hybris.